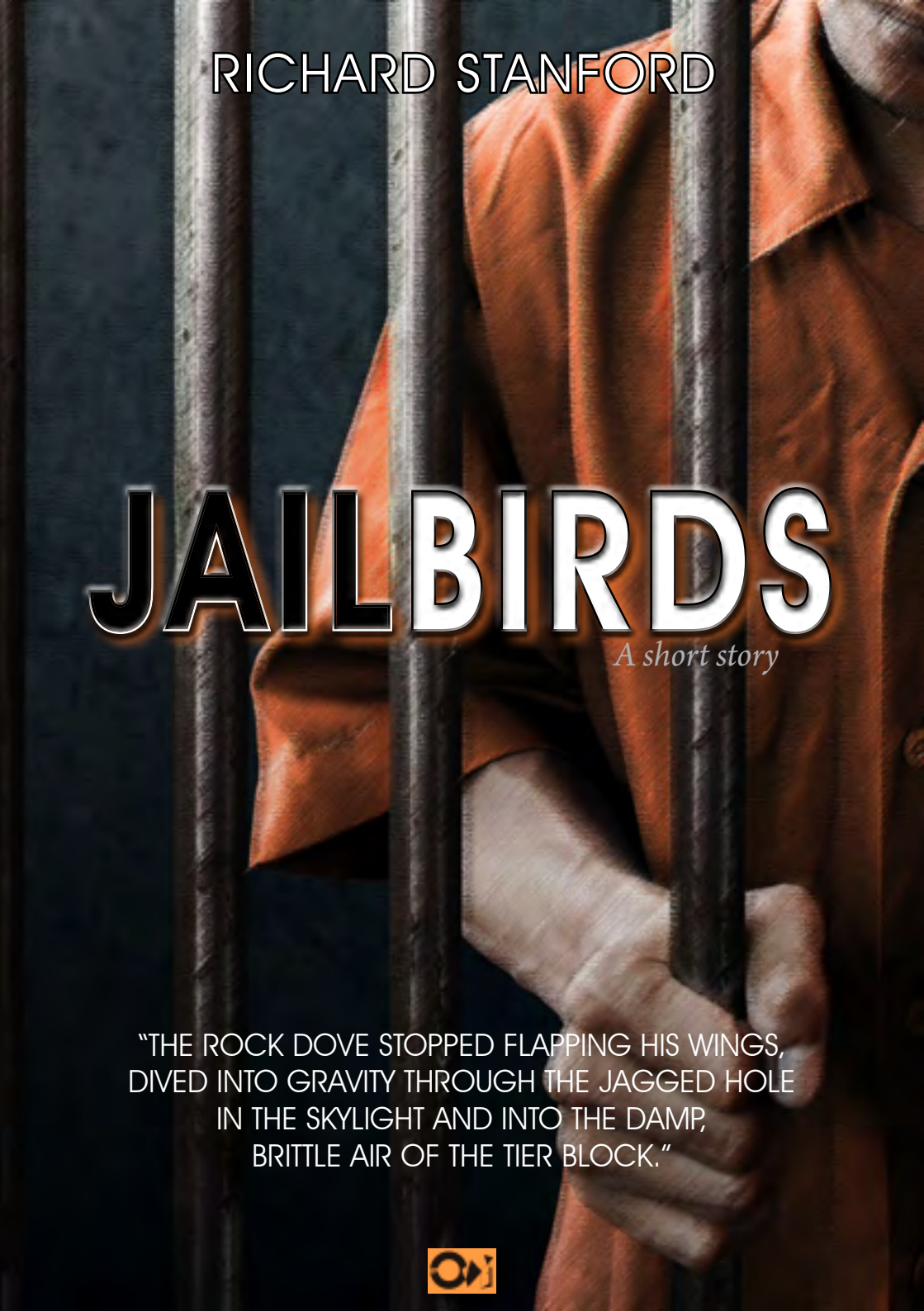
RICHARD STANFORD
JAILBIRDS
A short story
"THE ROCK DOVE STOPPED FLAPPING HIS WINGS,
DIVED INTO GRAVITY THROUGH THE JAGGED HOLE
IN THE SKYLIGHT AND INTO THE DAMP,
BRITTLE AIR OF THE TIER BLOCK."

Richard Stanford

Jailbirds

A short story

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The rock dove soared over the grey wall, caught a draft of warm air that thrust him higher over the courtyard to the centre block building and beyond that the north star. With the beacon secure in sight, he dipped his left wing and allowed the up-draft to spin him in a wide circle, spiralling upward over the dome of the rotunda, over the concrete exercise yard covered with sparkling broken glass. The rock dove stopped flapping his wings, dived into gravity through the jagged hole in the skylight and into the damp, brittle air of the tier block. He swooped down the length of the tier block, and when he felt the others had seen enough, he turned sharply and rose up to the rusty steel rafters. He landed gently, his claws gripping the cold metal. He fluttered his wings, shaking off the dust, and tucked them to his warm body. He looked at the other birds, at least fifty here and none was interested in him. They all arched their quivering green necks down to the two men invading their nest with the thunderous echoes of footsteps. They have not seen the likes of these in a very long time.

Rocky Smith led the way, followed by Lee who was looking up at the rock doves in a row, marvelling at how this place had become an aviary.

"I find it fascinating that we call corrections a service. Who exactly is being served?" Smith said, his tall, strapping frame cutting through the harsh rays of morning light streaming in through the dirty windows rising high above them to the third tier. His eyes squinted, always moving, and his salt-and-pepper hair is pushed straight back after years of facing the wind on the bridge of HMS Chiswick.

"What is it you want done?" asked Lee, taking in the aroma of aged urine that tickled his nostrils.

Rocky started up the spiral cascading staircase, towards the hundred eyes of the pigeons studying him. "Mr. Robinette, I wish you to clean up the entire tier block. Two tiers, twenty-six cells, topped with a penthouse level of 12; sixty-four cells in all, each one four-by-eight feet. I have some archival photographs taken in the late 19th century for you to look at. It will give you an idea of what St. Vincent-de-Paul Penitentiary looked like in its prime."

"This place had a prime?" said Lee.

They reached the second tier and walked along the narrow gangway past the cells. Lee became aware of the sound of his work boots on the metal grate.

No matter what pace he kept or how hard his boots struck the metal, it would always from this time forward sound to him like marching.

"A fine point, Mr. Robinette. Nevertheless, a good scrubbing, some sandblasting and some paint will do excellently well. Children will then come with their parents and pose for photographs in the cells, acting as if they are hardened criminals. Then they will go home, turn on their television sets and scream for the death of the first criminal they see. We'll also make gobs of money renting the place out as a movie set. Prison films - a wonderful, popular genre."

Rocky stopped at one of the cells and pulled back the heavy steel door. "These were built for silence. Here you were supposed to pray to God for guidance, to contemplate the error of your ways, to change your life. Who could pray in here? Indeed, who could stay silent in here without first going stark, raving mad? That, of course, was the point." He entered the cell, his body filling the narrow space. Lee hesitated. Over twelve years of house construction and renovation, he had been in small spaces like this before but never one without windows. Rocky smiled at him and said, "It's all right. I won't lock you in."

Lee stepped inside the cell, his lips pursed, his bright blue eyes looking amused and watchful as if anything might jump out at him. Rocky could see that Lee was strong across the shoulders, befitting his profession. The rest of him was spindly, his frame diminished within the narrow cell. Rocky wondered how long it would take for the pressure of the turquoise walls to do their magic. Lee stretched out his arms, touching the opposite walls, feeling the years of dampness.

"Not a lot of room is there?" said Rocky. "Now then, if you come across any lettering, words, names or poems etched into the walls, it's very important to leave them there. Do not sand them away."

The cell imposed an intimacy that made Lee nervous. He backed out to the gangway. "And all this for a museum?"

"Exactly," said Rocky as he came out of the cell and leaned over the railing. "I used to be a warden. Now I'm a curator. Imagine. I want you to recreate the worst possible place in the world, the very last place you would ever want to stay…right here. Right here in this place."

That would not be hard, thought Lee, as he watched several tufts of feather float down through the rays of sunlight from the fluttering wings of one of the rock doves. "A warden?"

"I trained with Her Majesty's Prison Service until I got too dangerous for them. I came to Canada and your Corrections Service allowed me to establish the very first minimum security prison for young offenders. They were a fine group of fellows. I know those fine fellows

were murderers. Nonetheless, they were geniuses, each and every one. I would go to the courthouse, watch their 30-second trials and collect them as they were taken to the paddy wagons."

"You selected convicts for your prison?"

"Indeed." said Rocky. "I collared a mathematician once…murderous fellow…killed his grandmother in a wild shooting spree. He became a poet, published no less, and a very good one. Not a Keats by a long shot, but dramatic nonetheless. We produced plays, magazines, books, comic books, literacy classes. We almost got our hands on a movie camera but when the department got wind of that, they swooped down on us during a rehearsal and gobbled up all the equipment. Now that would've been a movie!" Rocky suddenly marches off along the gangway. "I must be off. If you have any questions you know where to find me. It goes without saying that it's government so take as much time as you need. Have a fine morning, Mr. Robinette."

Ricky's footsteps faded into the dull grey distance of the cellblock. Then, Lee was alone with the silence, except for the soft fluttering above. He looked up at the line of black eyes peering down at him. "Sorry," whispered Lee while admiring the oddity of their choosing this prison rather than any number of barns just on the other side of the river.

He spent the rest of the morning carrying in his equipment from his truck and set up a long table on the main floor of the tier block. He didn't bother bringing in any of his portable lights; it seemed there was more than enough tawny gold light penetrating through the weathered windows and the shattered skylight high above, making it feel as if it was always sunset.

None of the guys in Lee's crew wanted to take this job even though it was a government contract. Lee didn't care. He hadn't minded not being around those guys, not since last summer when he began seeing the world through a viewfinder. He watched one of the rock doves swoop down from the rafters and land in front him with an expectant tilt of

the head, like an old friend asking why he hadn't been around for so long. Lee broke off a piece of his muffin and offered it in the palm of his hand. The rock dove snapped it up. "You want some coffee with that?" said Lee offering out his thermos cup. The rock dove seemed insulted and he flew back up to the rafters, his neck shining in the golden light.

Lee entered a cell. He ran his hand over one of the walls. There were scores of cracks - each would have to be cemented, sanded and painted. The only grouting needed would be in the corners and along the joins in the floors. The bolts holding the bar frames would have to be replaced, the bars sandblasted and spray-painted. The tip of his forefinger touched something that suggested a pattern. He ran his finger over the gouges, forming one letter then another: angel fin be/as 5255 ftw. Lee moved in closer, trying to understand each word but without success. The next set of reliefs: 32,000- 48,000- 80,000, with a check mark next to each. A final 90 dangled, unfinished.

That night and each night for the next two weeks, Lee showered twice: when he first got home and again after supper. "You look like a prune," Shirley said on the third night when Lee came into the living room, only a towel around his waist, his long brown hair cascading around his neck. She released the wine glass to him, he took a sip, savoured it. It was the first time since the summer, on the porch, that they had been so close but Shirley grabbed it back like the swing of an axe.

"Why are you doing this job alone?" she asked.

"I told you, none of the others guys wanted it," said Lee.

"You're the boss. You own the company."

"I want to do it this way. I'm tired of them," he said, trudging up the stairs.

Lee lay in bed, pouring over several photo contact sheets, zooming into each image, trying to recall the forest trail he had taken, the rocky slope he had climbed, or the abandoned farmhouse he had passed on that misty morning in July. The image he was looking at didn't look

like anything he could recall: the cedar trees were a dark, lurid green and the stream shimmered in silver over the rocks. Looking at these images, he doubted he would ever find those locations again, and he was sad, wrapped in the warmth of that time.

Lee had pleaded with Shirley that they go somewhere different that year – New York, the Grand Canyon, anywhere but another two weeks in Lake Weir and the endless rounds of beer, horseshoes, barbecues and target practice. One of his crew, Drake, had gone paranoid on them after several contractors trucks were hijacked for their equipment. Using his contacts from his lengthy record on the street, Drake picked up seven .41 calibre Derringers for each of the vans in the fleet and right there, on their holiday by the lake, he wanted everyone to take target practice.

Lee laughed. "These aren't for Rambo," he said. "They're for Bat Masterson." Drake tilted his head like a quizzical dog. "It was a 1950s western. Gene Barry? You never saw it? He wore a black derby, vest, black jacket, carried a cane, and his gun was an ivory handled Derringer that he never used."

"How old are you, Lee?"

"Old enough to know what videotape is. I left that stupid pop-gun in the van and it's staying there. Try not to kill any squirrels, Drake. I'm going to do my own shooting."

Lee had bought a Yashica-D double reflex with the larger 2-1/4 negative so he would feel he was taking a photograph, not a snapshot. It took him away every morning at sunrise. He would drive along roads he had never taken before, past the rolling green hills of the Canadian Shield. He sought out dead-ends, discovering that there were almost always pathways that carried on into the deep forest. It became a daily passion of securing images in the viewfinder, of not clicking the shutter instantly, of waiting for the light to shift just a little, and of panning the camera ever so slightly one way or another seeking a line or a shadow or an empty space he could not explain. When he found that moment,

he clicked the shutter. Each day he drove further and further away from Lake Weir, deep into the hills where the rocks had taken over, until near the end of the holiday he had not returned to the cottage in time for supper. He was sitting on the top of a cliff a hundred kilometres to the northwest watching the sunset.

When he returned, Shirley was on the balcony waiting for him in the shadows. "You'd rather do that then spend time with me?"

Lee shot her a look that stabbed. Lately he'd grown more and more censorious, always quarrelling with another voice in his head. "I was the one who wanted the two of us to go to the Grand Canyon. And here we are."

"Some of us are. Others, not so much."

"I told you," he said. "I can't take listening to them anymore, the same conversations. Do you want to see the photographs I've been taking?"

Her dark eyes blazed at him for only a moment before he heard the sounds of her retreating footsteps on the porch then the screen door slamming shut. For another second Lee brooded on the swinging door, then walked back to his car, and drove home.

Back at work, Lee avoided his usual stop at the Tim Horton's where his crew would gather for their morning bitch session. Instead, for the first time he drove off the highway into the dirt parking lot of Napoleon's Coffee Shop.

The walls of Napoleon's were sickly green, aged in steam and fat. Lee walked by the truckers and suits, none of them so much as looking up at him. This was the feeling he wanted: to have no one know him so he could think of this as his last morning of freedom, his last cup of fresh coffee, the last time he would breathe the fresh September wind blowing in the mist off the river. The waitress behind the counter greeted him with a twist of a smile and a coffee. Maybe she was a high school classmate, the kind who in a few years grows up into someone unrecognizable from the past. He was certain he had never seen such alabaster

skin or those sad eyes. He went back to his truck, thinking the waitress' legs would be the last and the most beautiful he would ever see.

Lee didn't drive through the main gate of the prison. He chose to walk through the tunnel under the perimeter wall, out to the wide courtyard of cracked, yellowed concrete, surrounded on all sides by rusted razor wire looping along the top of the wall. Above him a rock dove soared upwards, beating its wings, landing gingerly on the shattered glass of the skylight then vanished inside. Lee continued towards the centre block rotunda, the hub for the five tier blocks that fanned out like the spindles of a wheel. Two of those spindles, three storeys of gray-black granite, enveloped Lee as he moved closer to the rotunda. It swallowed him whole as he stepped through the steel door.

"I say, old chap, how are you doing?" Rocky Smith called out from the far end of the tier block. Do empty prisons need wardens? Thought Lee. "Haven't heard from you in a couple of days," said Rocky, his footsteps echoing into the infinity of the tier block.

"I've been busy. It's a big job."

"That's not why I'm here, my good man." said Rocky, walking around the large table, curious over Lee's drills, sanders, brushes, bags of plaster and cement, spatulas, chisels and gloves covered in white dust and all arranged in perfect rows. "I'm not expecting a report. I thought you might be interested in those photographs. You know, turn-of-the-century, the prison all spit-and-polish, everyone dying on the inside. It's fascinating material. You really must come and see. I insist. We'll have a cup of tea."

It was the first time that Lee had ever been invited for tea…and photographs. Something about it made him feel shy, as if this ritual might suggest an intimacy. "All right. I'll come by, maybe tomorrow."

"Wonderful," said Rocky, marching off down the range.

As soon as Lee snapped the sound mufflers over his ears, the rock doves knew what was coming and all flew off through the glass. Lee

turned on the sander, pressed it against the wall until it bit into surface paint, obliterating it into a swirling cloud of white powder. Within moments the sandpaper was torn to ribbons. He turned off the machine and pulled off the mufflers. Through the ringing in his ears he heard footsteps. Stepping out of the cell he expected to see Rocky Smith. Instead it was the silhouette of a short man flickering like an early movie in the waves of dust.

"How you doing, my friend?" the man said. He strode past Lee looking the cells up and down as if he were admiring a work of art.

"Can I help you?" said Lee.

"Hell no."

"You're with Correctional Services?"

"Ha! Correctional Services. You might say that. I used to live here, off and on for a few years – mostly on," he said with pride. He pointed: "That one up there, that one over there, and this one right here," he said disappearing into a cell. He came out shaking his head, "I heard they were turning this hole into a museum. That's funny. I've been to museums. They have paintings on the wall."

Although short, he had the torso of a body-builder, bulging muscles, broad shoulders and short arms; black curly hair with Brylcream sheen; and dark arched eyebrows that gave his face the look of perpetual surprise, matching his constant smile.

"You mean you were an inmate?" asked Lee.

The man stopped, and turned to look Lee in the eye: "Yeah, inmate, con, crook, rounder, jailbird, square john, incorrigible. But hey, I'm not angry," he said turning back to his slow walk along the range. "I loved every minute of it."

Lee was certain this guy was out of his mind. Or maybe in this place you learn the art of irony. "You loved it?"

The short man arrived at end of the range, turned and started back, slowly this time: "Benny used to live in there. Yeah, I loved it, damn straight. Guys like Benny were the best friends I ever had. When I was in school, all my friends wanted to be astronauts or doctors or lawyers, shit like that. Me? Right from the start I wanted to be a criminal. I even put it next to my graduation photo for the yearbook but the principal had it cut out. Imagine that. I had a vision of what I wanted to do with my life and that sob. censored me. I watched every heist movie ever made, all of them - Bogart, Cagney, Huston. Even if the movie wasn't about a heist but it had a heist scene in it. People would be talking about making love or having meaning in their miserable little lives and suddenly BANG - someone decides to rob a bank. I'd watch it, just for the rush. I was twelve years old when my old man took me to a bank to open a savings account. The teller told me how to fill out a withdrawal form, leanin' over real close. She thought I was a horny little kid just ogling those tits but it was all I could do to stop from checking out the security cameras, the guard at the door, the exits, where the safe was. Shit. Twelve years old and I was casing the joint. For nights after I lay in bed, closed my eyes and walked through how I would do it. Ten years later, I did. Went like clockwork. „Course I had time to think about it. It was the guts that took the time. Lovely."

"The guts?"

"Anybody can rob a bank. But to actually do it you need chutzpah." The man suddenly stopped to take a hard look at Lee. "First time you've ever been with an ex-con, right?"

"No," said Lee. "Half the guys in my crew are ex-cons, the other half current ones."

"And that's why you've got the job, right? „Cause none of them wanted anything to do with fixing up this hole." He looks up to the rafters and the rock doves. "Look at that. Thousands of men thought of nothing else but how to bust out of this joint and those pigeons bust right back in. I'll tell ya, in a few days you'll like it too – just like them. So long," he said and with a quick turn he marched out of the range. Lee

watched him walk through the rotunda, slap the shattered glass on the guard booth and shout: "Fuck you, Sanderson!"

The next day, Lee took Rocky up on his invitation to view the archival photographs of the prison. Rocky covered a table with a dozen 8x10 black-and-white photographs of St.Vincent-de-Paul Penitentiary in its "new and clean days". Lee saw the photos as utterly empty – nothing more than steel and concrete with shadows moving through them. There was the classic long shot of the range, in deep focus, black and dark, the light from the windows blocked from somewhere way off-frame. There was also a shot of the rotunda taken in 1948 from the third tier catwalk looking down on about a hundred inmates gathered in a perfect circle, a solitary guard watching over them. Each inmate wore the same uniform: jeans, a jacket with a number patch over the chest and a cap. Lee saw that many of the inmates had lowered or turned their heads away from the camera. There were a few, however, who looked defiantly at the camera as if to say: "Take a good look, sucker, „cause one day soon I'm getting' out."

"We would never do that today," said Rocky. "Gathering inmates all together at the same time in an open space like that - much too dangerous. You'd never leave one guard with that many convicts. I'm sure off-frame there was several guards with shotguns." The irony did not escape Lee as he attempted to build this museum, with walls that must be ripped open, the years blasted away, pulverized into dust, revealing the letters and numbers of a million stories while Rocky looked at photographs of some of the finest museums of all time.

"I suspect you have little," Rocky paused for emphasis: "…sympathy for these men?"

"How can I? They're all dead."

"And…?"

"This is a contract job, simple as that. I don't give a shit about all the rest. What I do want to know is how the hell did someone like you get a name like Rocky?"

"Indeed. My full name is Selwyn Rocksborough Smith and thus hardly something to be uttered on a range. Interestingly enough, it was an inmate who gave me the name Rocky. I thought that any inmate, who had the audacity to change the name of the Warden, and right to the Warden's face, was a good man to keep around. I was proven correct. He became a writer."

"You don't expect me to believe this crap do you? Writers, poets, literacy classes. You make out as if your prison was a university."

"Believe what you will, sir. There is no doubt as to the crimes my prisoners committed and that they deserved to be incarcerated. However, people are sent to prison for punishment, not to be punished. What I found was that once they were treated respectfully, their anger slowly dissipated and I discovered beneath the surface a host of talents. When you think about it, prison is the perfect place for creative expression. It has many of the attributes that artists strive for: isolation, silence, and release from the mundane."

"And steel bars. That's always handy," said Lee.

Rocky nodded, realizing there was nothing more to be said to Lee, nothing that would penetrate. He began gathering up the photographs.

"There was a guy who came to the range yesterday," said Lee. "Said he was an inmate in this place and wanted to see the range before it got painted over."

"Really? How odd. We didn't exactly announce anything publicly."

"He was a very strange guy. He said he really liked it here."

Rocky smiled: "Indeed. Next time, get his name. I could hire him to work as a guide through the museum."

On his drive to the prison the following morning, Lee was still wondering why Rocky Smith had assumed there would be a next time. He drove into the parking lot at Napoleon's. He was a regular now and yet had never mustered up the courage to ask the waitress her name.

Rhonda finally gave up hope and one morning she just told him.

"I suppose now you want to know mine," he said.

"I already know it, Lee Robinette," she said with glee. "It's written on the side of your truck."

Lee blushed, stunned by his stupidity.

"Do you like going in there?" Rhonda said, tipping her head in the direction of the prison.

"It's a job. How did you know?"

"The prison is the only news around here."

"But it's closed."

"Exactly. So what are you doing in there?"

"Renovations. They're turning it into a museum."

"A museum? You must be kidding. Will that include the bodies?"

They shared a laugh. Lee looked into her deep brown eyes, feeling a tenderness he has not felt in long time, a sense that this may be the one person who has some interest in him.

"Sorry, "said Rhonda. "That was crude."

"It's all right. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"You know we serve a really good lunch here."

"I'm sure you do. Maybe. Thanks. You make really good coffee."

Rhonda watched Lee as he walked out to his truck. "Really good coffee," she repeated to herself with a sigh.

In the prison parking lot, Lee paused for a moment to make sure no one was around before taking a small bag from the passenger seat. He walked quickly through the main gate as if he were carrying a bomb.

Only when he reached the courtyard near the rotunda did he slow down, secure with his secret - except for the rock dove swirling overhead. Lee did not want to risk embarrassing himself in front of Rocky Smith. Besides, he wasn't sure he could even do it. But from the moment he had seen Ricky's archival photographs of the prison, he wanted to try something different from the streams of his summer landscapes.

Inside the range, Lee paused, awaiting any tell-tale echoes of footsteps. He opened his camera bag and removed the Yashica-D and a tripod. As he unfolded the tripod he looked out on the range and the huge columns of yellow light illuminating all three floors of the range as intensely as a film set. Lee didn't even think about it: he set the aperture for f22, the shutter speed for 1/500 and looked through the viewfinder. It was perfect. This was not the chaos of meandering streams, rocky slopes and quivering light. Here was geometric precision, the rails and cells multiplying into infinity, into the brilliant white chasm miles beyond the columns of light.

Lee panned the camera to a cell but in the viewfinder it held no interest for him. He panned the camera back to take in the entire range, the hundred barred eyes staring out into the void. He pressed the shutter button.

Later in the day, Lee was cleaning up his paint brushes and watching the rock doves return from their day in the sun. They ignored him, cleaning their

feathers, slowly closing their eyes, tired and contented. Sunlight: something that Lee no longer seemed to miss. The same rock dove swooped down and landed on the table. He nibbled the crusts of bread that Lee held out in the palm of his hand. The soft touch of the dove's beak on Lee's skin sent a cold shiver down his back, not one of fear but of excitement. Suddenly the bird flew off to the rafters upon hearing the thunderous echo of footsteps coming down the range. Lee was angry that their moment together had been so cruelly interrupted by the short man once again.

"What the hell are you doing here?" barked Lee.

"Hey, back off. I have tenant's rights," he said, inspecting the newly painted cells. "You've done a lot of work here. Looks good."

"Who are you, anyway?"

"Louis Morel. And I know who you are."

"Yeah, looks like everybody does. So if you have tenant's rights, I want to ask you something. In here." Louis follows Lee into a cell and points to the wall where angel fin be/ar 5255 ftw is coated with new paint. "What does all this mean?"

Louis leans in for a closer look. "Angel? Don't remember him. That would've been his nickname. A fin is five years; b&e for break and enter; ar for armed robbery. 5255 is his inmate number. Ftw? that's fuck the world."

"And what about these numbers?" asked Lee pointing at 32,000- 48,000- 80,000.

"That's not Angel. That's a lifer marking out the hours of his time. Hours are easier to deal with than years – more digestible."

"Lifer. That means murder, right?"

"Yeah. The 90 means he probably died in here."

"Serves him right," said Lee walking out of the cell and back to his tool table.

"Hey, none of us said we didn't deserve being in here. We took it

as an occupational hazard, the cost of doing business. You know, overhead. But doing time? It was a picnic - three squares a day, basketball games, poker, and years of quiet, peaceful rest…each one of which I badly needed."

"You needed rest?" said Lee incredulously.

"Hey, it's tough work. Casing out a place can take weeks. Then doing the job takes a lot out of you. The stress alone can kill you. Then, once you have all that money, there's living on the lam, boozin', travelling, women, and they'll suck you dry, I'll tell you. I'd bet you'd like it."

Lee shook his head, not so much furious at the idea but at the audacity.

"Oh no, you would. I can see it in your eyes. You have that desperate look about you, like the last subway train just pulled out of the station and you're stranded alone in the city. I figure you like coming here. Secretly you enjoy it because it gets you away from all the boring ones out there."

Lee wasn't going to let on how close he was. "You think you're Freud?"

"Was he a famous warden? I know a con when I see one and I think you'd like it just for the thrill. It's like sex only more lucrative."

"I think you'd better go.

"I've seen you in that greasy spoon down the highway, and..."

"What! Are you stalking me?"

"Hey, I was havin' breakfast. Relax. I could see that waitress' eyes all over you, especially when you walked out. She was sizin' up your ass something fierce. You could rob that place."

Lee stared at Louis, curious as just where he might take it.

"It would be easy, don't you get it?" said Louis. "You guys would be like Stanwyck and MacMurray in Double Indemnity. She could be in on it, hand over the money playing all freaked out. Then you'd rendezvous afterwards, run off to Mexico together and spend six months makin' love on the beach. Hell, you wouldn't even need a gun. But having one gives the whole thing more of a rush."

"You live in a fantasy world," said Lee.

"If you think I'm the first jackass in the history of the world to come up with a wet dream like that, then you're the one living in a fantasy world.

Let me tell you something - I've seen enough of prison to know more about freedom. Louis shot a sharp, burning stare. "Watch yourself, punk ass. Watch yourself." With a high-pitched laugh Louis walked off down the range. "Have fun doing your time." As he walked through the rotunda, Lee heard "Fuck you, Sanderson!" again.

Lee cleaned up the last of the paint brushes. He turned off the power line, bid goodnight to the rock doves above and walked down the range. He stopped at the doorway of the rotunda, looked out over the courtyard and the wall cutting across the horizon. The moon went on like a lamp, slanting across the roofs, laying the shadow of clouds across the prison courtyard. Beyond the wall, Lee's wandering gaze caught the flickering house lights of a distant village. He felt that with the act of turning on lights these people were cutting off all relations with him. Now he were freer than he had ever been, at liberty to wait here in this place as long as he wanted, and as if nobody would dare touch him or drive him away or even speak to him.

Lee drove to Napoleon's hoping to have dinner with Rhonda but one of the waitresses told him she had finished for the day and wouldn't be back until the breakfast shift. He ordered a club sandwich to go. While he waited he called Shirley. He was ready to use the guaranteed overtime excuse but it wasn't necessary and he wasn't going to leave anything on the answering machine.

He drove the van through the main gate and parked in the courtyard. He walked to the rotunda carrying a sleeping bag and a pillow. Once inside he went to the cell on the ground floor that he had just finished that day. It was freshly painted pale blue, the bunk cream white and the writings on the wall floating in lines of rivets. He washed his face in the cold water of the sink, spread the sleeping bag and pillow on the bunk and laid down, expecting the ghosts to burst forward at any moment. He'd brought nothing to read as he wasn't expecting sleep or silence.

But silence is exactly what he got. He recalled it was not the same silence he felt diving underwater at the lake, for even there he could hear the sounds of bubbles and waves. Here it was a silence so deep, the concrete so enveloping him, surrounding him with the weight of a million tons of soundlessness, where nothing moved, nothing sounded and all light vanished into the black hole. After a time he could not measure, he grew accustomed to it and he seemed to float in boundless space.

The first yellow beam of morning light shone into Lee's eyes, startling him back to life. He jumped out of the bunk and out into range. Up above the rock doves were gone. He had not heard any fluttering in the night nor their flight to the outside. He ran down the range and burst out the door into the screaming, brilliant sunshine. It blinded him. He carried on with his brisk pace to the van.

Rocky Smith saw Lee, his hands over his eyes, jogging across the courtyard. "Mr. Robinette, you're looking rather pale. Did you get the name of that ex-convict who visited with you?"

Lee got to the van, fumbling for his keys. "Yeah...Louis Morel, I think."

"Louis Morel? I think that bloody unlikely. Louis Morel killed a bank teller and was hanged here in 1924. So unless he has a namesake, you've seen a ghost, and I don't believe in ghosts."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"I told you. I'm a curator now and I know the name of every man who was hanged here, like a curator of death. Louis Morel was one of the more infamous ones." Rocky Smith watched Lee intently as he found his keys and started the engine. "Mr. Robinette, did you sleep in the prison last night?"

"Yeah, I did."

"That is not a fine idea, my friend."

"I was working late; too tired to drive home, so I just crashed on a bunk."

"Yes indeed, crashed being the operative word," said Rocky with a worried look. "I think you're taking this job far too seriously. Why don't you come for a cup of tea, settle things down a bit?"

"No, I'm sorry, I can't do that. I'm clear on what I have to do now. Very clear."

"Mr. Robinette, it's a bloody government museum...," but Lee cut him off by pressing the pedal and speeding away.

The van weaved down the road. Lee reached into the glove compartment and rummaged around until his hand locked onto the Derringer. He held the gun.

Despite its size it had the weight of granite. The sign for Napoleon's loomed up ahead. Lee tucked the Derringer inside his belt, steered into the parking lot and turned off the engine. He opened the twin barrels of the Derringer - both were loaded. Through the front window he saw Rhonda pouring coffee, sweeping up a line of coins at the window table. She waved to him with a hurry up gesture of her hand.

Lee secured the Derringer in his belt, fastened up his jacket, stepped out of the van and started towards the front door. The gun pinched his skin and he feared if he walked too fast it might go off. Then, he heard him. He looked up to a blur diving, diving, diving down to the earth. The rock dove soared up, up to the deep blue sky, its neck vibrating silver green, spun off into a wide figure-8 over and over again, until it swooped high to join up with the flock. Together they flew along the river ravine away from the prison.

Rhonda went to the counter to ready Lee's coffee. When she turned around, Lee was still standing, motionless in the middle of the parking lot staring up at the sky. She knew he was shy, but this was pathetic. With impatience this time, her hands insisted he come in. But he never saw her. Lee turned and walked off across the highway towards the river ravine. Rhonda felt foolish now as if she were a teenager begging for the last dance. She saw Lee unfasten his jacket, pull out what looked to be a rock and throw it as far and as high as he possibly could. It arched

high then tumbled with a dead splash into the muddy water. Lee, with a smile on his face, walked back across the highway heading straight for her.

THE END

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Richard Stanford

Jailbirds

A short story

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RICHARD STANFORD

JAILBIRDS

A short story

"THE ROCK DOVE STOPPED FLAPPING HIS WINGS, DIVED INTO GRAVITY THROUGH THE JAGGED HOLE IN THE SKYLIGHT AND INTO THE DAMP, BRITTLE AIR OF THE TIER BLOCK."

Richard Stanford, When I'm not writing short stories and essays or producing documentary films in Montréal, I can be found mucking about in my gardens trying to create the perfect eggplant.